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## NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING ON SOCIAL MEDIA SITES: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE 2019 AUSTRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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**Abstract:** *Election campaigns in the age of social media are rapidly changing their character. Due to the declining party loyalty of voters, once stable constituencies have become increasingly volatile and the importance of campaigning has increased. Parties are now thought to be more likely than in the past to opt for negative campaigning. This paper examines the postings that parties or top candidates made on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter during the 2019 National Council election campaign. The results suggest that - at least on social media sites - the cost-benefit analysis of the parties might turn towards negative campaigning, as the average popularity of negative campaigning posts was higher than those that were not tagged with negative campaigning.*

**Keywords:** *Social Media; Negative Campaigning; Election; Campaign; Political Parties*

## INTRODUCTION

Election campaigns in the age of social media are rapidly changing their character (Swanson and Mancini 1996; Gallagher 2003): as voters' party allegiance declines, once-stable constituencies have become increasingly volatile (Drummond 2006; Mair 1997; Mair, Müller, and Plasser 2004). As political parties lose their influence in the electoral market, the importance of campaigning has increased (West 1993, 2005) and parties are now thought to be more likely than in the past to opt for offensive campaigning that targets political opponents (e.g. Mair, Müller, and Plasser 2004). Such a strategy is better known as 'negative campaigning'. Negative campaigning is a strategy used to attract voters by criticizing the opponent (Swanson and Mancini 1996; Geer 2008). Negative campaigning describes running a negative political campaign. In the course of election campaigns, negative campaigning has now established itself globally in the field of political communication. If one follows Schmücking (2015), then negative campaigning is part of the election campaign and thus also part of political communication (Schmücking 2015).

A look at the literature reveals two fundamentally different approaches to defining negative campaigning: a directional as well as an evaluative understanding:

- While the directional understanding assumes that "any mention of the political opponent in one's posting (regardless of whether the criticism is true, false, 'ethically correct', trivial, honest, or dishonest) is already negative campaigning" (Rauh 2016; Surlin and Gordon 1977; Walter 2014)
- The evaluative approach assumes that negative campaigning only prevails when the political opponent is demeaned (Elmelund-Præstekær 2010).

In the context of this thesis, evaluative understanding is used.

A party resorts to negative campaigning to try to become the preferred party of voters and by trying to mitigate positive feelings about opposing candidates or parties. Negative campaigning is thus conducted to pick up on the mistakes and weaknesses of political opponents and capitalize on them - i.e. the election campaign is conducted with these - supposed - weaknesses of the political competitor instead of focusing on one's strengths or qualities. The opposite strategy would be that of positive campaigning, in which parties engage in acclamation or self-evaluation to appear more desirable than their opponents (Schmücking 2015; Budesheim, Houston, and DePaola 1996; Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; Westen 2008; Budge and Farlie 1983; Benoit et al. 2003).

Recently, numerous studies have been conducted that examine the incidence of negative campaigning (Benoit et al. 2003; Geer 2008), its effects on political trust, voter turnout, and the political system (Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007), and the strategic choices associated with it (Damore 2002; Hale, Fox, and

Farmer 1996; Ridout and Holland 2010). Theoretical contributions to the situations under which parties resort to negative campaigning strategies have been developed primarily in the context of the United States (US) two-party system (Geer 2008). As a result, and because of the absence concerning social media, theories of negative campaigning on social media sites are still somewhat limited in scope. Studies of campaigning conducted on social media sites are needed to come to an understanding of this phenomenon.

This article attempts to fill the research gap by examining which formats Austria's political parties chose to use in the 2019 National Council election campaign on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter, and which party characteristics explain the use of negative campaigning in Austria. Since the study is conducted in the form of a full survey, it can statistically examine differences between parties. This study contributes to the topic of negative campaigning on social media sites in several ways:

- First, this study contributes to the development of a general theory of negative campaigning on social media by empirically testing the hypotheses put forth.
- Second, this study makes a theoretical contribution by examining the extent to which party orientation can influence the decision to engage in negative campaigning.
- Third, this study contributes by presenting new data on the negative campaigning of national political parties in the 2019 National Council election campaign on social media sites.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, an overview of the existing literature is presented. Second, hypotheses are developed about how political party characteristics and contextual electoral characteristics might influence a party's decision to use negative campaigning. Next, case selection, data collection, and analysis are discussed. Finally, the results of the empirical analysis are presented, conclusions are drawn, and several avenues for future research are suggested.

## PARTY CHARACTERISTICS AND NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

In the field of negative campaigning, a considerable amount of work has been devoted to understanding the strategic dilemmas surrounding the use of negative campaigning (Hale, Fox, and Farmer 1996; Sigelman and Buell Jr 2003; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). The risks of going negative are known as 'boomerang effects'. Candidates or parties that attempt to reduce the positive feelings voters have about an opponent run the risk that these attacks will generate negative feelings toward the attacker rather than the target (Garrazone 1984; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 2013). In this context, Hibbs (1977) has noted that the respective demands of the electorate (or the voters behind the parties) significantly influence what the parties do and do not do.

Theoretically, candidates or parties are expected to make use of negative campaigning only when the expected benefits (i.e., voter support) outweigh the potential risks (voter rejection). In general, research suggests that candidates use social media to craft beneficial campaign narratives, communicate with and mobilize voters, and build credible reputations. The above research confirms that attention to some forms of social media can influence candidate evaluations; however, there is still little evidence on what content is most important on these social media sites. More recently, researchers have begun to examine photos and images posted on candidates' social media platforms. Page and Duffy (2018) tracked the images posted on the Twitter and Facebook feeds of the 2012 Republican presidential candidates and found that the visual social media strategies of the four remaining candidates (i.e., Santorum, Gingrich, Paul, and Romney) differed greatly, but all attempted to convey credibility concepts such as trustworthiness and expertise with visual storytelling.

In the 2016 US presidential campaign, it was noted that not only had the number of posts increased substantially from 2012, but the number of images or videos had also increased (Hendricks and Schill 2017; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Enli 2017; Smith and Duggan 2012; Towner 2017). If one follows Auter (Auter and Fine 2016) but also Stier (2018). Negative campaigning takes place predominantly on Twitter. The question of the orientation of parties that primarily rely on negative campaigning has been explored by Immerzeel and Pickup (2015), who found in their paper 'Populist radical right parties mobilizing 'the people'?' that negative campaigning is more likely to be used by right-wing parties than by left-wing parties (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). Walter and Van der Brug (2013a) demonstrated that liberal parties engage in negative campaigning more often than 'green parties' (Walter and van der Brug 2013a).

The literature points to two-party characteristics that influence the likelihood that parties resort to the use of negative campaigning. These can also be applied to an Austrian context, where parties rather than candidates are the main actors.

First, the party's government status affects its propensity to use negative campaigning. Parties that do not hold office are more likely to use this campaign strategy because opposition parties need to make clear to voters why they should be in the office and governing parties should not (Hale, Fox, and Farmer 1996; Kahn and Kenney 2004). Governing parties have a natural advantage over opposition parties; they can promote themselves and their program through their official position and duties (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007). Moreover, because of their position, governing parties usually receive more media coverage and therefore benefit from name recognition and an established reputation (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 2006). Finally, compared to governing parties, opposition parties are not in the office and therefore have less to lose and more to gain by speaking negatively. Walter and Van der Brug (2013b) argue that whether parties engage in negative campaigning in a multiparty system depends in part on their coalition potential. Parties with low coalition potential

have little to lose from negative campaigning, as their chances of being part of the government are slim to none from the start. Such parties will be more willing to take the risks involved than parties with high coalition potential. They test whether several indicators of a party's coalition potential derived from the literature on coalition formation are related to a party's decision to make use of negative campaigning.

The 2019 National Council election campaign certainly holds an exceptional position because, first, it was conducted on a large scale on social media sites (Zmolnig et al. 2019; Atzmüller 2019), and second, an independent expert government was in power at the time of the campaign (Beham 2019). Based on this situation, the following hypotheses can be derived.

## HYPOTHESES

**Hypothesis 1:** Twitter will be used more frequently for negative campaigning than Facebook.

**Hypothesis 2:** Images will be used more often for negative campaigning than videos.

**Hypothesis 3:** Small parties like 'Jetzt' use negative campaigning more often than large parties like the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP).

**Hypothesis 4:** Right-wing parties like the FPÖ use negative campaigning more often than left-wing parties like the SPÖ.

**Hypothesis 5:** Liberal parties like 'Neos' use negative campaigning more often than green parties.

**Hypothesis 6:** The more postings a party makes, the more often negative campaigning is used.

**Hypothesis 7:** Negative campaigning is not as popular with potential voters as general postings.

## CASE SELECTION, DATA, AND CODING PROCEDURES

This article examines negative campaigning on social media sites in the context of the 2019 National Council election campaign in Austria. Austria is a developed democracy with a parliamentary system. For this reason, election campaigns in Austria are party-centric, unlike in the United States. Data collection is limited to national political parties that were represented in the National Council during the legislative

period 26, as well as 'Die Grünen'. 'Die Grünen' is, therefore, part of the analysis since it could be assumed that they would enter the National Council again. The analysis was conducted as a full survey - i.e., all posts published in the period between August 1, 2019, and September 22, 2019, and identified according to defined content and formal relevance criteria were included in the analysis.

Relevant is the social media sites 'Facebook' and 'Twitter' and in these channels than those postings that just have a relevant author: Relevant authors are the first or second-ranked of ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, 'Neos', 'Die Grünen' and 'Jetzt' as well as the respective party accounts. A post in another social media channel or by another author - but with the same content or text - is considered a new, independent post. As a rule, independent postings are characterized by the name of the author, the date, the time, and at least one text. A posting can also contain a photo or a video. All coding decisions have to be made based on the textual, auditory as well as visual information in the posting - this information is of equal importance in each case.

The coding method is very similar to Geer's coding approach (2006). The unit of analysis is the disparagement of the opponent, i.e. evaluative understanding was used. The content analysis was conducted by native-speaking proponents. Geer's coding method (2006) proved to be reliable. Intercoder reliability was measured by coding a random sample of appeals. The most difficult coding category was determining the unit of analysis, i.e., what is a demotion and what is not. The intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha) is .84 for a unit of analysis selection. For tone (negative versus general), Krippendorff's alpha is .97. In total, coders selected 6252 posts on the parties' social media pages.

## RESULTS

The analysis showed that during the 2019 National Council election campaign, a total of 6252 postings were made by the parties studied or their top candidates, with Facebook accounting for 3430 postings and Twitter for 2822 - 835 postings contained disparaging remarks and were therefore marked as 'negative campaigning': 373 of these on Facebook and 462 on Twitter. Hypothesis 1 assumes that Twitter is more likely to be used for negative campaigning than Facebook. So here the direction is negative. At 95 percent of the significance level, the significance value is 0. So we accept the null hypothesis (Null Hypothesis - Both samples are from the same population). From the analysis performed, we cannot find any statistical difference between the use of negative campaigning on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

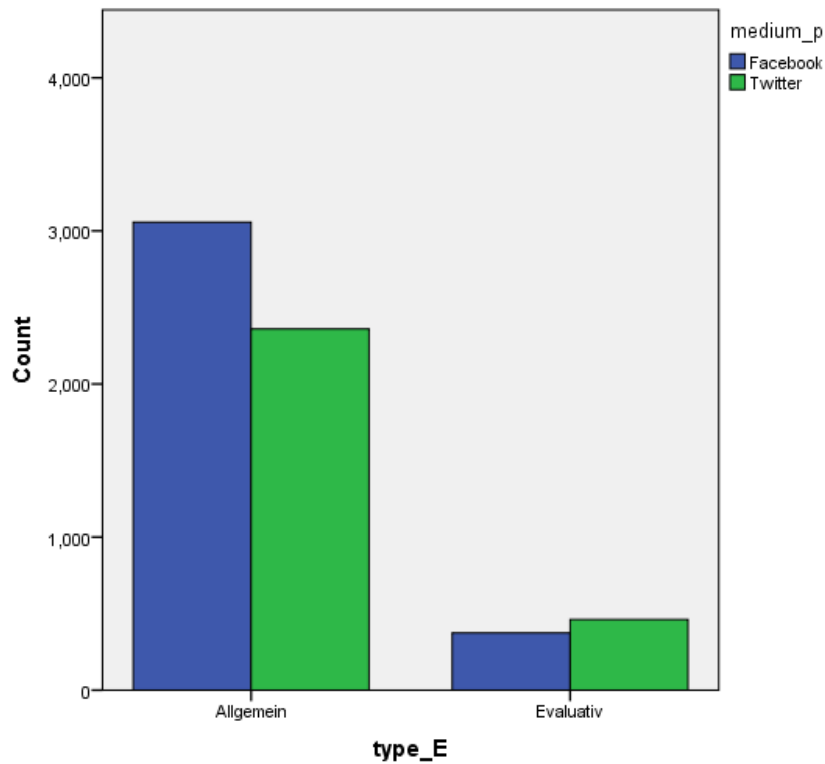


Figure 1. Number of Posts Regular/Negative Campaigning

Group Statistics					
	medium_p	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
type_E	Facebook	3430	.11	.311	.005
	Twitter	2822	.16	.370	.007

Figure 2. Statistic Facebook/Twitter Posts Mean/Std. Deviation

Of the 6252 posts, 16 posts were tagged with image, 3182 were tagged with image/text, 1324 were tagged with text, 4 were tagged with video, and 1726 were tagged with video/text.



Descriptives									
type_E									
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum	Between-Component Variance
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound			
Bild	16	.13	.342	.085	-.06	.31	0	1	
Bild/Text	3182	.09	.292	.005	.08	.10	0	1	
Text	1324	.21	.411	.011	.19	.24	0	1	
Video	4	.00	.000	.000	.00	.00	0	0	
Video/Text	1726	.14	.352	.008	.13	.16	0	1	
Total	6252	.13	.340	.004	.13	.14	0	1	
Model									
Fixed Effects			.337	.004	.13	.14			
Random Effects				.037	.03	.24			.003

Figure 3. Number of Posts tagged with Text/Image/Video

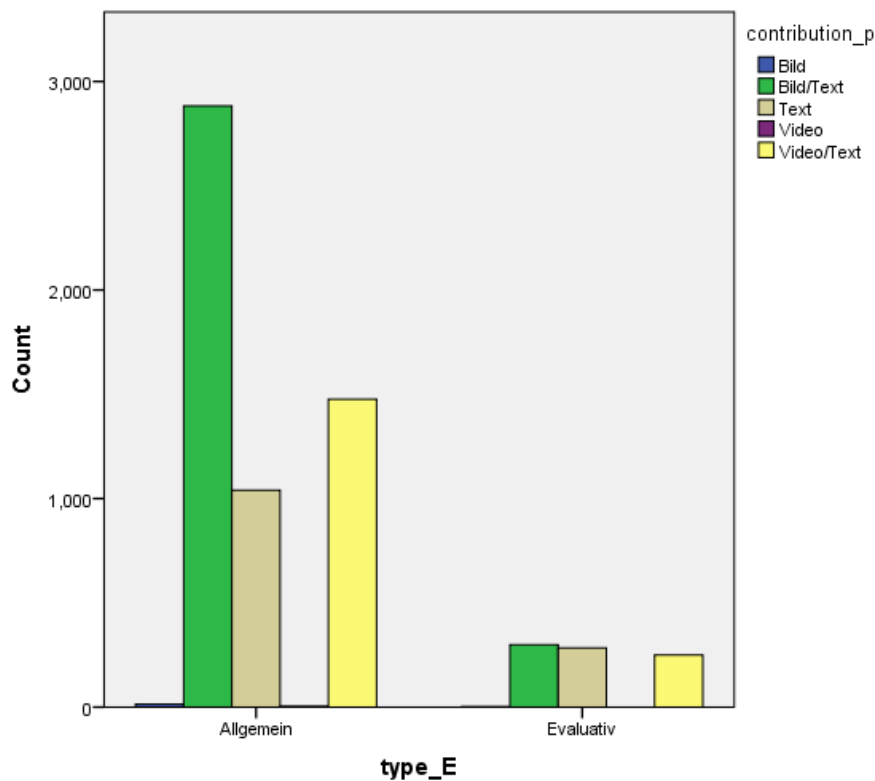


Figure 4. Number of Posts tagged with Image/Image Text/Text/Video - Splitted into Regular and Evaluative

Looking at the p-value, we can see that it is below the significance level. Thus, from the research results, images are used more often for negative campaigns than videos. In total, ÖVP has 956 postings, now has 316 postings on Facebook and Twitter:

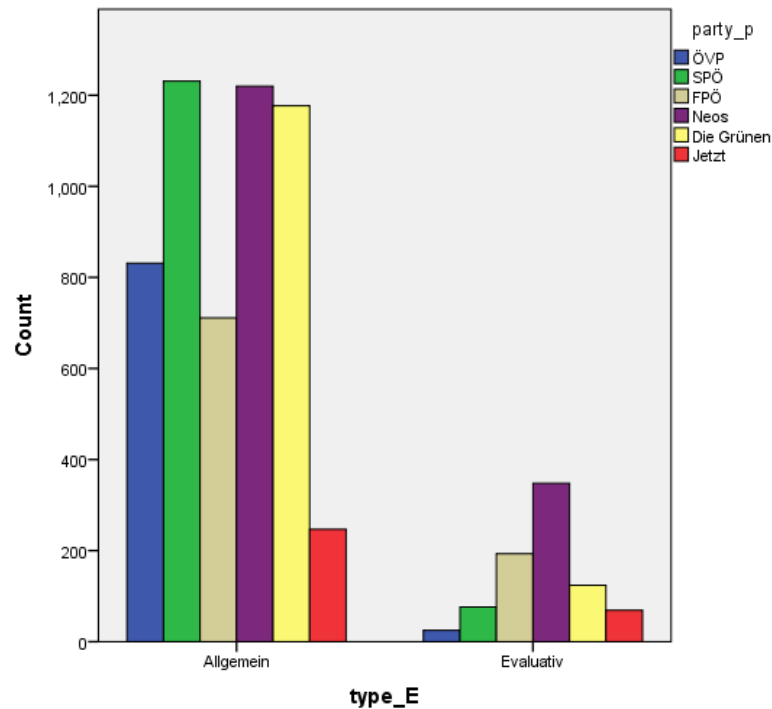


Figure 5. Number of Posts per Party - Splitted into Regular and Evaluative

From the findings, the table value of  $p$  is greater than the calculated significance level, thus it can be concluded that there is a statistical difference between the two groups, which means that small parties use negative campaigns more often than large parties. If we now check whether right-wing parties such as the FPÖ use negative campaigning more often than left-wing parties such as the SPÖ then we see that there is a significant difference between the groups and from this we can conclude that right-wing parties such as the FPÖ use negative campaigning more than left-wing parties such as the SPÖ. Do liberal parties ('Neos') use negative campaigning more often than green parties ('Die Grünen')? The analysis of the evaluation showed that the number of the negative campaigning of the liberals like 'Neos' is very high, much higher than all other parties.

### Correlations

		type_E	level_1	level_2	level_3
type_E	Pearson Correlation	1	-.023	-.023	-.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.068	.073	.080
	N	6252	6252	6252	6252
level_1	Pearson Correlation	-.023	1	1.000**	.999**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.068		.000	.000
	N	6252	6252	6252	6252
level_2	Pearson Correlation	-.023	1.000**	1	.999**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.073	.000		.000
	N	6252	6252	6252	6252
level_3	Pearson Correlation	-.022	.999**	.999**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.080	.000	.000	
	N	6252	6252	6252	6252

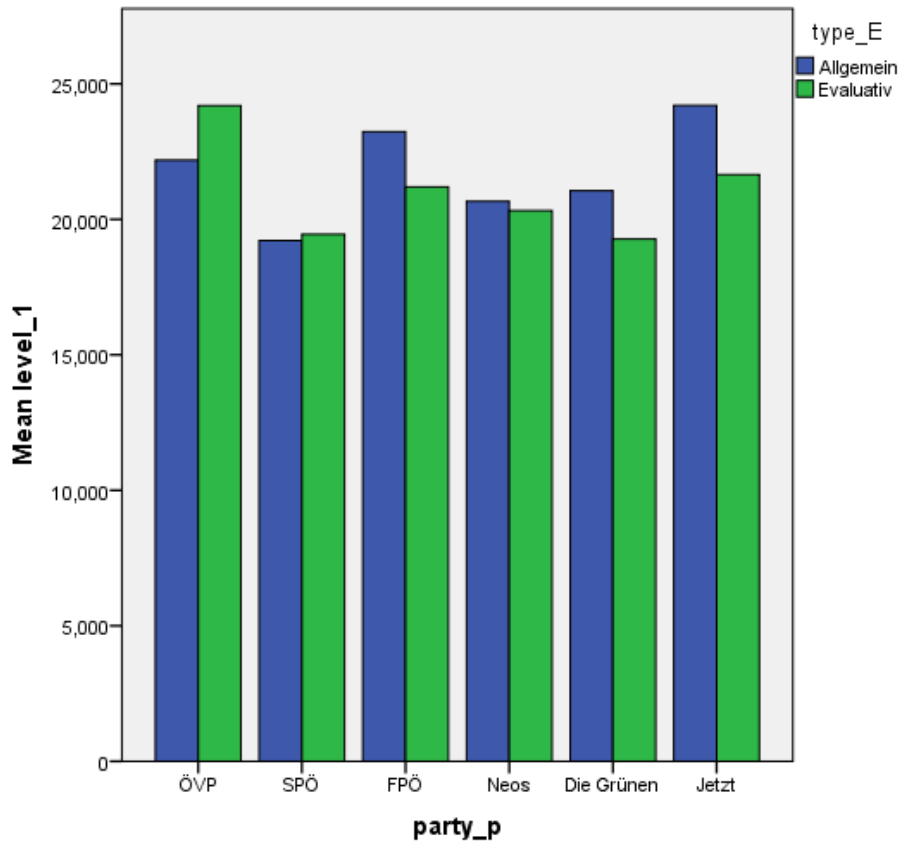
\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Correlations

		type_E	level_1	level_2	level_3
Kendall's tau_b	type_E	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.027*	-.027*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.015	.013
		N	6252	6252	6252
	level_1	Correlation Coefficient	-.027*	1.000	.987**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.	.000
		N	6252	6252	6252
	level_2	Correlation Coefficient	-.027*	.987**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.000	.
		N	6252	6252	6252
	level_3	Correlation Coefficient	-.027*	.912**	.924**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	.000	.000
		N	6252	6252	6252
Spearman's rho	type_E	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.031*	-.032*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.015	.013
		N	6252	6252	6252
	level_1	Correlation Coefficient	-.031*	1.000	.998**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.	.000
		N	6252	6252	6252
	level_2	Correlation Coefficient	-.032*	.998**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.000	.
		N	6252	6252	6252
	level_3	Correlation Coefficient	-.032*	.968**	.969**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	.000	.000
		N	6252	6252	6252

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



If one follows Garramone then negative campaigning creates a so-called boomerang effect, i.e. that these attacks create negative feelings towards the attacker instead of the attacked (Garramone 1984). The analysis showed that the posts that were marked with negative campaigning received on average more likes than those posts that were not marked with negative campaigning. From this, we can conclude that Garramone's thesis is not valid - at least in this campaign - because users gave more approval to the disparaging postings.

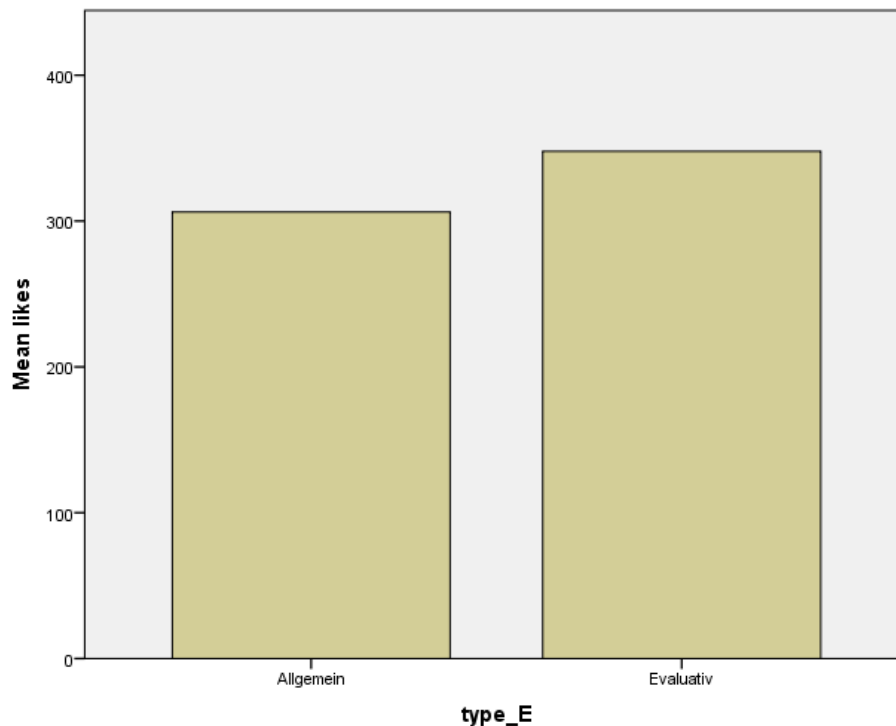


Figure 6. Mean Likes on both Social Media Pages


## CONCLUSION

This article has added to our knowledge of negative campaigning on social media sites in several ways. First, it has contributed to the state of the research by being the first study of negative campaigning on social media sites to examine a large enough number of cases (N=6252) to test the use of negative campaigning by parties. This allowed us to test the extent to which theories developed, primarily in the US, are applicable beyond their context (Kahn and Kenney 2004; Lau and Pomper 2004).

Consistent with the work from the US, we find that smaller opposition parties are more likely to be negative in postings. Moreover, the results support the notion that we should consider indicators of coalition potential when studying negative campaigning in Austria (Walter 2014; Walter and van der Brug 2013a). We found that parties positioned further from the center and parties with less government experience are more likely to engage in negative campaigning, which is consistent with the notion that parties with less coalition potential engage more. Because there are both similarities and important differences across parties in the processes that lead to negative campaigning, further work in this area is urgently needed.

Second, this is the first study to examine the use of negative campaigning in Austrian election campaigns on social media sites and to test previously established theories for validity and attempt to establish a relationship between negative campaigning and voter approval on social media sites: The results suggest that - at least on social media sites - the parties' cost-benefit analysis may be turning towards Negative Campaigning, as the average popularity of negative campaigning posts was greater than those that were not tagged with negative campaigning.

Future research, apart from the findings in this paper, should therefore examine not only the social media sites or the type of posting, but more importantly the issues on which negative campaigning is used. This study is based on postings of the parties produced in the Austrian National Council election campaign 2019. They are therefore well suited to examine the number of postings with negative, derogatory content, but not to examine changes in campaign strategies throughout an election campaign. This study did not examine the significant effects of contextual variables. However, one must consider the possibility that contextual variables, such as the end of the campaign, affect the use of negative campaigning. Future research could test this.

This study only examines the Austrian National Council election campaign conducted on social media sites. This limits the ability to estimate the effects of system-level variables, such as the electoral system. 

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